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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 RABAT 000573

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SUBJECT: WESTERN SAHARA: MORE RESPONSIVE BUT STILL TOUGH
GOVERNMENT, DIVIDED POPULAR LOYALTIES

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Classified by CDA Wayne Bush for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

11. (C) Summary and introduction: Rabat Polcouns traveled for a week to the Western Sahara, March 4-9, principally in Laayoune, with one day in Smara - the traditional seat of Sahrawi culture and religion. He met Moroccan government representatives, pro-government business, tribal and youth leaders and more than half a dozen members of CORCAS, along with dissidents, the UN, and neutral expatriate observers. The Moroccan administration in Laayoune is now headed by a Wali who is an urbanist, not a policeman. In the past six months he has increased the effort to ease up a bit on the repression and discrimination, which after thirty years of rule has alienated many of the original inhabitants. The ex-Spanish Sahrawis, now a minority of the population, frequently favor the POLISARIO and self determination, but the "intifada" they talk about is confined mostly to secondary schools, and active dissidence is quashed by repression. A few students with flags appear to represent no real threat to the status quo, but the administration hasn't gone far in relaxing its grip. Many of the original inhabitants, or their descendants, favor the government. In either case, youth are beginning to play a major role. This, the second of two cables on the trip, reports specific encounters, focusing on the changes that appear to be underway in the territory. End Summary and Introduction

Meetings: A New Wali Working on Hearts and Minds:

12. (C) Polcouns began his week with a meeting with the Wali of Laayoune, M'hamed Dryef, later joined by his staff. Dryef, an experienced former Wali of Fes and Casablanca, was named only in October. He is from the city management, not the security side, of the Ministry of the Interior, and has a mandate to ease up and open up. Since our last visit in October, he has eliminated the Army presence on the streets and sharply reduced visible police presence, although it later became clear that this was partly supplanted by extensive plainclothes deployment. He has given orders to the police to show restraint in demonstrations, but (apparently under orders from MOI) said that even peaceful display of POLISARIO flags and symbols would not be tolerated. He has worked to improve conditions in the locally-infamous Laayoune prison, including bringing in full time doctors to provide medical care of patients. He denied human rights activists' reports of extensive hunger strikes in the prisons. The Wali produced a passport he had just

ordered issued to human rights activist Brahim Dahane.

13. (C) Joined by his staff, the Wali maintained he was working hard to improve economic conditions, particularly for the Sahrawis. Unemployment remained the biggest problem, with a local rate of 20 percent vice the official (and probably understated) national rate of 14 percent. Sahrawi employment is particularly difficult, given the lack of education and skills among the sedentarised Sahrawi nomads. The government has succeeded in putting almost all children in school (close to universal in primary, 85% in secondary, they said). It is also working on plans to stimulate small enterprises, but most Sahrawi graduates are trained for and want government jobs (as in Morocco in general), of which he has only a few to offer. The government was following up its extensive program of local infrastructure investment with a plan, approved by CORCAS, to build 21,000 units of housing, aiming to eliminate bidonvilles around Laayoune. These would generate some jobs, as would national programs such as microcredits and small business development.

14. (C) In the Wali's large meeting, out of some 15 staffers, only one, his young secretary-general, was Sahrawi, reflecting a pattern observed in all government structures. Several of the staffers appeared quite out of place, although Laayoune is a heavily subsidised and in many ways a pleasant version of a small Moroccan city. One exception to Moroccan dominated government was the Laayoune city hall, a Tammany-like operation formally led by mayor and CORCAS head Kalihenna Ould ar Rachid, but run in fact by his brother, who reviewed local politics. Ould ar Rachid is from the (nationalist) Istiqlal party, which holds 6 of 9 seats in the council and is similarly represented in the Parliament. The other major party is the (leftist) USFP. The (Islamist) PJD has only a few local activists (Note: likely only among the Moroccan settlers End note.).

Young Activists - Pro-Government but Independent

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15. (C) A group of pro-government young activists maintained that their efforts to promote reform had recently seen some improvement in both economic and political spheres. There had been noticeable changes in the Security establishment. A new chief of DGSN, Armil Bouchaib, had contributed to easing of tension in the past few months. They reported that some individuals had received compensation for suffering in previous years of repression. (Note: this was interesting as it was not previously clear that the Moroccan program of reconciliation for the excesses of Hassan II's "years of lead," and its compensation program, had applied to the Sahara. End note.) This was a major change since 2005, when a series of police attacks alienated the population. Most importantly, they maintained that the government now appeared open and there seemed more prospect of dialogue with the authorities.

Human Rights Activists (POLISARIO supporters)

16. (C) A meeting of Human rights activists offered a different perspective. Brahim Dahane and others from the "Saharan Association for the Defense of Human rights violations by Morocco" said that the government had agreed to recognize their organization, but only if they dropped the "by Morocco" part of their name. They had been gradually gaining more ability to work openly and had recently been visited by a delegation of Moroccan Human rights activists. Nonetheless, problems remain. They insisted their demonstration on Human Rights Day in December 2006 was strictly peaceful, but they had been arrested, and some beaten, by police. Dahane said the authorities did not respect the laws of Morocco, which protect the right to peaceful protest. They urged USG pressure on the GOM to

allow greater freedom of expression in the territory. While they insisted their emphasis was human rights, they made clear that they favored independence and that politically, the POLISARIO is their representative. That mandate could be withdrawn, some members asserted, if the leaders in Tindouf compromise on self-determination.

School Battlefields

17. (C) According to the separatist activists, there was increasing tension between Sahrawi and Moroccan youths in the schools, and the Moroccan youth are being encouraged by the police to attack the Sahrawis, while Sahrawi students are being expelled. Women and children are picked up by the police and beaten, although they allowed that generally they were released soon after. They raised a case of 15 youth who disappeared, believed to be in the hands of the police. Separately, two days later, Polcouns by chance witnessed a demonstration of Sahrawi mothers in front of the Wilaya demanding information about the 15 missing. They were clear that they supported the POLISARIO as representatives, but said that they would respect the results of a fair referendum. They hoped the USG would support a solution in accord with international law. They exhibited a lack of confidence in the Moroccan proposal for autonomy, which they knew little about. When pressed however as to what they wanted for their children, one of the activists said: "if our children could live in a stable situation they could say the Sahara is Moroccan."

CORCAS

18. (C) A group of CORCAS members maintained they had their say at the extraordinary meeting in December which voted for the plan, but they had not seen a draft nor did they know if its details. They believed that Sahara should remain Moroccan, with control of its own government, parliament and judiciary. Most were in favor of a bicameral parliament with a second house to accomodate the tribes. They felt that the head of the local government should be required to be Sahrawi.

Smara: Center of Sahrawi (Reguibat) Culture and Religion

19. (C) During a one day visit to Smara, all the Sahrawis were from the Reguibat tribe, reflecting the city's status as the traditional tribal religious and cultural center, and a focal

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point of Sahrawi Islam. Local leaders expressed support for the government, but displayed some resentment to settlers. The governor, representing part of a region separate from Laayoune that included Sahrawi ethnic Guelmine and Tan Tan north of the colonial line, said there were few settlers, though he would not have counted Sahrawis from the nothern part of his region as settlers. From what could be seen of his staff, it was, at the professional level, nearly all Moroccan. The governor was contradicted by a senior locally elected Sahrawi, who said even in Smara, Spanish era-inhabitants were only a third of the population, another third were Sahrawis - Reguibat, moved in from north of the territory and another third were ethnic Moroccans (Note: a distribution borne out by informal observation of the street. End note.). While this official was resigned to the continuing presence of the settlers, he thought only Sahrawis should be able to vote in the autonomous parliament. This is important, he said, because "now we are a minority" and could not win a fair election.

110. (C) While many of the Samara Sahrawis are accommodating to Moroccan rule, resentment and fear were also evident. In the market, a large number of the shops did not show the near-obligatory picture of the king. UNHCR officials

involved with the recently completed successful round of CBM flights originating from Samara reported that the Sahrawis appeared relieved when they took off, and that tension was much higher between the families and authorities on the Moroccan side. Several Samarans expressed concern about remaining land mines laid by both sides, though noted that some demining operations were underway.

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Bush